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ABSTRACT

The diversity that actually exists among Asian-Pacific American students is explored, and the most common stereotypes that mainstream teachers have of them are described. Teachers often express a preference for working with Asian-Pacific American students, but judging students on stereotypes, even positive ones, neglects individual differences and may limit students' opportunities to develop their potential. The three most common stereotypes that can affect classroom interactions are: (1) all Asian-Pacific American students are high achievers; (2) all Asian-Pacific American students look alike; and (3) all Asian cultures are similar, and all Asians can work well together. However, some general cultural patterns do exist among Asian-Pacific American subgroups. These include controlling one's expression and avoiding direct confrontation. To promote equitable participation of Asian-Pacific American students, guidelines are presented for teachers to incorporate into daily teaching practice. These include learning cross-cultural communication skills, implementing an empowering curriculum, and building strong connections to students' homes and communities. Respect for cultural boundaries and individual differences is the key to successful teaching for Asian-Pacific American students. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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BEARING THE IMAGE OF MODEL MINORITY: AN INSIDE LOOK BEHIND THE CLASSROOM DOOR

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Asian-Pacific American students are often portrayed as the "model minority." They are viewed as high achievers, quiet, studious, disciplined, respecting authority, and having few or no problems in school (Kiang, Lan & Sheehan, 1995; Osajima, 1988; & Suzuki, 1989). The stereotypes can be misleading, and failure to recognize this can impede the effectiveness of classroom teaching and the learning of APA students.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge the stereotypical image of Asian-Pacific American students. The paper addresses the diversity that exists among Asian-Pacific American students, and outlines the most common stereotypes that mainstream teachers have of them. It does, however, also identify some general cultural behavioral patterns that do exist across the different groups of Asian-Pacific American students and the implication of these general patterns for teachers. Finally, it presents recommendations for teachers to promote equitable participation in the schooling experiences of Asian-Pacific American students.

Asian-Pacific American Students: The Diverse Student Population

Teachers often express their preference for working with Asian-Pacific American students. It is common for them to make remarks about Asian students' model minority image such as, "I would like to have more Asian kids in class because they are so well behaved. They work hard and never make trouble (Pang, 1990, p. 11)." But judging students based on stereotypes neglects individual differences and may result in limiting students' opportunities to fully develop their potential in other areas.

The Asian-Pacific American population can be categorized into four subgroups based on their geographical origin: East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Pacific Islander. East Asians include Chinese, Japanese, and Korean; Southeast Asians include Burmese, Cambodian, Laotian, Malaysian, Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese; South Asian include Indian and Pakistani; and Pacific Islanders include Guamanian, Hawaiian, Tahitian, and Samoan (Feng, 1994; Pang, 1990). In addition to regional differences, other aspects of the background of APA students vary significantly. For example, the ancestors of East Asians have settled in the U.S. since the mid-1800s. Most of them came to the U.S. as legal immigrants under the statute of family reunification and had formal schooling experiences prior to coming to this country. This group of Asians tends to be more established when compared to other Asian immigrant subgroups. On the contrary, most of the Southeast Asians came to this country as refugees, fleeing the communist regimes and countries at war. They rarely have literacy in their own language. Many of them were not prepared for the immigration experience psychologically and emotionally (Gougeon, 1993). In general, variations exist among APA students in a number of areas, such as their place of origin (foreign vs. native born; city or rural areas), residence in the U.S. (inside or outside of their own ethnic community), educational background, socioeconomic status, experiences in their home country, reasons for immigrant status, and levels of assimilation (Pang, 1990; Pang 1995).

Recognizing the diversity that exists among Asian-Pacific American students prior to working with them can better prepare teachers to respond to the challenges. Teachers may have observed that some behavioral patterns of the APA students are incongruent

with their expectations and personal experiences. The unfamiliarity may easily lead teachers to rely on limited information and treat students based on the existing stereotypes. To avoid such biased practice, teacher have to make a conscious effort to identify their interaction pattern with APA students in the classroom. The three common stereotypes that are presented below are examples of how they can affect classroom interactions.

Stereotypes of Asian-Pacific American Students

Stereotype I - All Asian-Pacific American Students Are High Achievers

The model minority stereotype obscures the need to provide educational services that address the needs of the full range of APA students, especially those who came from southeast Asia. It also prevents underachieving APA students from having equal access to the curriculum. According to Pang's (1995) study of the Seattle School District between 1986-87, the high school dropout rate of Vietnamese (11.8%) and other Southeast Asian (17.9%) students are twice or more those of Japanese (5.1%) and Chinese (5.3%) students. Furthermore, the CTBS Scores of the Oakland Unified School District between 1990-91 showed disparity among ethnic groups within the district. The total student enrollment is 52,096 consisting of 9,864 Asian and 4,391 white. In the area of reading, 69% of the Asian students fell below 50 percentile (national average) versus 22% of the white students. In the area of math, 35% of the Asian students performed below 50 percentile versus 24% of white students (Commission for Positive Change in the Oakland

Public Schools, 1991). The following points raise other doubts about the "model minority" myth (Oei & Lyon, 1996):

> "* The percentage of Asian Americans below the poverty line is 12.2 percent -- exactly the same as the national rate and double that of white Americans.
> * Twenty percent of Asian Americans -- about the same percentage as whites -- do not have a high school diploma.
> * Many Asian American students who need academic help are not receiving it. ... teachers who are accustomed to viewing Asians as high achievers may not notice those who are struggling.
> * Likewise, behaviors that lead Asian American youth into depression, drugs, gangs, and violence are sometimes overlooked (pp. 56-57)."

Many APA students have expressed frustration and even felt that it was a burden to be perceived as intelligent. In reality, they just view themselves as average students (Oei & Lyon, 1996; Pang, 1990; Pang & Evans, 1995). It is important that all Asian-Pacific American students are exposed to a well-balanced curriculum to develop their skills in all areas.

Stereotype II - All Asian-Pacific American Students Have Identical Appearance

Many mainstream teachers see Asian-Pacific American students as all looking alike. APA students feel offended when others fail to correctly distinguish their facial features and group identification. During an interview, an Asian student expressed,

> "'Why are we so hard to tell apart? We're completely different people!' But they just see the yellow skin and the black hair and the brown eyes and they think, 'Oh, they just all look alike (Oei & Lyon, 1996, p. 51).'"

In Pang's 1990 study reports that a five-year old boy was disturbed by the failure of others to recognize his Korean-American identity. He said "They (his classmates) call me Chinese! (Pang, 1990, p. 62)" In the eyes of Asians, each Asian face look very different. They generally can distinguish the group identification of another Asian based on the facial

structure. The unique characteristics that exist among Asian groups are just as diverse as those that exist among individuals of European descent. APA students want their individuality to be acknowledged because they see that the features of their faces look very different from other Asians. Numerous studies have pointed out that individuals see more variability in physical, personal, and behavioral characteristics within their own group than within outgroups (Brewer & Kramer, 1985). This phenomenon seems to be true across different ethnic groups. However, teachers need to be careful that the stereotype of all Asians looking alike may create tension that will interfere with effective cross-cultural communication in the learning environment.

Stereotype III - All Asian Cultures Are the Same

Many teachers assume that all Asian cultures are quite similar and Asian students can work well with one another. The reality is that a wide range of cultural practices exist in Asian cultures. Each sub-group has its own language, holidays, customs, cuisine, costumes, ceremonies, religions, etc. For example, the social stratification in Vietnamese culture is 1). scholar, 2) farmers/fisherman, 3). laborer, and 4). businessman; while the system in Cambodian culture is 1). King, 2). monk, 3). administrator, 4). technician, 5). businessman, and 6). farmer/laborer. Another difference in the Asian custom is the use of eating utensils. Unlike the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese who all use chopsticks and bowls, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Indonesian use forks and spoons (Indochinese Mental Health Project, 1980).

The historical relationship between the different Asian sub-groups sometimes affect APA students' interaction in the school setting. For example, Pang's (1990) study

revealed an incident in which a Cambodian student refused to receive help from a Vietnamese student who had been in the country longer. The rationale was that Vietnam and Cambodia had been in war for many years. There is a great deal of mistrust between the two groups. Another example is the ambivalent relationship between Japanese and Korean students. Korea had once been colonized by Japan. Therefore, students may not necessarily develop a bond among themselves. Sometimes, students from the same ethnic group may not be able to communicate with one another due to dialect differences. For instances, the APA students from Hong Kong speak Cantonese while the ones from Mainland China and Taiwan speak Mandarin. Teachers may want to incorporate team building activities into the curriculum and discuss the importance of working in groups to build trust among different groups of students. This can ensure the effectiveness of the partner system.

Teachers must be aware that if they use the term "Asian culture" without referring to a specific Asian group, this will mislead the students into believing that all the Asian cultures are the same. It also ignores the cultural uniqueness of each sub-group. In turn, this will further reinforce the stereotypes.

General Cultural Behavioral Patterns

Up to this point, this paper has discussed stereotypes that fail to acknowledge the differences among the Asian cultures and students, but some general cultural patterns do exist among Asian-Pacific American sub-groups. These include controlling one's expression and dealing with confrontational situations.

Reading Non-Verbal Cues

Teachers repeatedly state that they have difficulties reading non-verbal cues from Asian-Pacific American students. Teachers stated that APA students appeared to be calm and wore a neutral facial expression during class. For examples, Asian students do not demonstrate as much excitement when responding to teacher's comments or competitive games, and they also initiate fewer questions when compared to their native-born American counterparts. This can cause misunderstanding in the classroom. APA students have the concept of school being a formal learning environment and they respect teachers as the authority figures. If they may appear to control their emotions, it is their way of demonstrating their seriousness in learning. However, American teachers may expect stimulated learners to be animated and expressive. Oftentimes, attentive APA students are being perceived as bored, uninterested, unmotivated, unengaged, etc. Since non-verbal behaviors play a significant role in the communication process, learning about the cultural behaviors of the students can prevent teachers from making unnecessary assumptions and hence facilitate the learning process. Teachers should also keep in mind that the students' behavior often reflects their degree of acculturation; there are many APA students who are well adjusted in American schools.

Dealing with Confrontation

Very often, Asian-Pacific American students are misunderstood for their desire to make compromises at school. Teachers and other students may feel that APA students are

not willing to take a stand on confrontational issues and lack the courage to stand up for themselves. This behavior can make them become the targets of harassment. APA students are often afraid to report to the teacher in the event of harassment. Many feel vulnerable in defending themselves at school (Kiang, Lan, & Sheehan, 1995). In handling conflict situations, teachers need to be more patient in giving APA students a voice to explain what happened or prompting them for more details.

In most traditional Asian cultural, direct confrontation is discouraged. Individuals who openly argue or defend themselves in public are considered immature and lacking a sense of self-control. Confrontational behaviors often result in physical punishment at home and this prevents children for demonstrating aggressive behaviors. In the case of confrontational situations, APA students also face a dilemma of cultural conflicts between the home culture and school culture. Their behavior is a reflection of what is acceptable in their cultural frame of reference.

The above section discussed the common cultural patterns of the APA students' behaviors. They seem more prevalent among foreign-born or first-generation immigrant students. Acknowledging these can help teachers create an equitable classroom environment that would allow all students to grow to their fullest potential.

Strategies that Promote Equitable Classroom Participation

To promote an equitable participation of all Asian-Pacific American students as well as other students, I have developed guidelines for teachers to incorporate into their daily teaching practices. These include 1). equipping ourselves and the students with

knowledge of effective cross-cultural communication skills, 2). instilling an empowering curriculum in the classroom, and 3). building a strong connection to students' homes and communities.

Cross-Cultural Competence

1. Respect students' cultural boundaries when communicating with them. When conflicts occur, if the students are extremely uncomfortable with face to face confrontation in resolving the conflict, teachers can have students express their thoughts through writing.
2. Build a personal connection to students' cultural heritage. Teachers can learn about students' names, whether they are native born or foreign born, their place of origin, their academic experiences, a few words of students' native languages, etc. Teacher should address students by their correct names. The name system in some Asian countries is different from the American system. For example, when addressing a Chinese student, the proper Chinese way is to pronounce the last name first, then the first name. This name system also is practiced in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Hmong (Indochinese Mental Health Project, 1980). However, the American way is just the opposite. Therefore, the name Wan Yee in Chinese style would become Yee Wan in American style. There are also a lot of similarities in the spelling of names such as Tings, Tangs, and Tongs (Gougeon, 1993). In dealing with unfamiliar names, avoid changing students' names into a shorter version or give them a new American name. Consult your students on how they would like to be addressed. Many teachers who give their APA students American names may be very well intentioned, hoping to

facilitate their students' adaptation process. However, this good intention may lead students to feel that their culture is inferior. A person's name plays an important role in defining who he/she is as a person. If students are not being addressed appropriately, they will get the message that their ethnic identity is not accepted by the school and the mainstream society. This may contribute to the feeling of alienation in their school experience.

To gain a better understanding of the students' self-identity, teacher can ask students to share their ethnic and cultural identification i.e. "Asian American," "Korean American," "Vietnamese," "American," etc. By showing interest in acknowledging APA students' individual differences, teachers can establish good rapport with students (Feng, 1994; Oei & Lyon, 1996; Trueba & Cheng, 1993).

3. Equip students with the skills to identify effective communication strategies in cross-cultural settings. For example, teachers can share some real life examples using role play or class discussion such as

> "Nguyet was invited to her American friend Heather's house for a party. When Nguyet had finished her first glass of juice, she wanted a second one. However, when Heather's mom went around the room asking who would like to have more to drink, Nguyet said 'no' to her. That's what she usually does when she visits her relatives. Nguyet then wondered why she did not got her second drink."

The teacher can use this example to explain what goes on in Nguyet's mind. In many APA cultures, directness can be considered as immature behavior in social settings. It is the custom of some Asian cultures to offer food to the guests a few times before they accept it. Nguyet is trying to be polite by not accepting the juice at the first request. She is waiting for Heather's mother to offer her the drink one more time. If

the party took place at Nguyet's house, Heather may have to say "No, thank you" a few times before Nguyet's mother stops giving her food. Teachers then can point out that in order to communicate with others effectively, one has to learn about others' communication style. In the mainstream cultural setting such as the school, one has to make direct requests instead of expecting the other person to guess what is in his/her mind.

4. Develop intercultural knowledge among students from diverse background to facilitate their adaptation process between home and school (Gougeon, 1993). Teacher can select topics of students' interest to openly discuss the different cultural interpretation that exist between different ethnic groups. For example, teacher can discuss the term "respect" in class. Teachers can have students share what "respect" means at home. Validate the various definitions that are shared by students from different backgrounds. Then, teachers can have students share their knowledge of what "respect" means at school. This kind of open discussion exercise allows students to see the diverse viewpoints of their peers. It also help students to clarify the confusions of expectation that they may have between home and school. Other topics for discussion can be friendship, non-verbal behavior, conflict situation, authority, education, etc.

Curriculum Development

1. Avoid making assumptions about APA students' academic abilities and what they already know when planning for instruction and activities (Feng, 1994; Oei & Lyon, 1996). For example, not all children have experienced a Thanksgiving meal or

know the names of national heroes in the United States.

2. Be cautious of the model minority stereotypes. Teachers should encourage APA students to develop skills in all areas including verbal, social and leadership skills. When assessing APA students' academic needs, teachers should use students' work as the basis for evaluating academic performance rather than letting the preconception of the model minority influence their decisions.
3. Teach questioning techniques through the use of games. This can ease students' anxiety in formal learning settings. Some Asian students may feel intimidated about asking questions because it can be perceived as challenging the authority figures. Knowing how to ask questions and practicing the questioning techniques can prepare students to become strategic and active learners. This can foster positive interaction between students and teachers.
4. Incorporate self-confidence and self-esteem building activities in your classroom. Very often, APA students observe that their physical characteristics do not match with what is portrayed as the mainstream norm. This can negatively affect their self-image and their perceptions of being able to fit into the mainstream society. The primary goal of the self-esteem activity should be to foster a sense of self-pride and self-acceptance as the product of one's cultural experiences. Classrooms which validate students' language and culture provide a nurturing environment for APA students to develop a strong sense of self-identity.
5. Introduce positive role models with Asian-Pacific origin through inviting guest speakers from local communities, and shared success stories of people from a broad

range of professions. This gives students an opportunities to see the possibilities of what they are capable of becoming.

6. Provide opportunities for Asian-Pacific American students to develop leadership skills through delegating classroom chores, establishing a conflict resolution system and having students play the role of conflict managers, and engaging students in cooperative group activities. Success associated with the various leadership experiences can also boost students' self-confidence.

7. Use multicultural literature to build respect for cultural diversity within the classroom. Asian-Pacific students not only have the opportunity to learn about experiences of people from their ethnic group, they can also learn about experiences of people from other cultures. All students will benefit from gaining a better understanding of themselves through comparing the similarities and differences among different groups. Through the use of literature, teachers can point out the common experiences that exist among all the groups. This will bring both the native-born and the foreign-born students as well as students from all the other ethnic groups closer together. When teachers incorporate students' cultural experiences and heritage into the curriculum, this will enable students to develop a sense of pride and belongingness.

8. Examine the stereotypes of Asians that are portrayed in literature, textbooks, television, or films - math and science geniuses, docile, submissive, quiet, or martial arts fighters. When challenging the stereotypes, teachers can supplement class discussions by sharing personal account of Asian experiences and additional reading

materials. Teachers can create an activity that serves as the basis for class discussion. They can, for example, ask questions such as, Do you know an Asian who does not like martial arts?, Do you know an Asian who is a good leader?, Do you know an Asian who enjoy studying literature rather than math or science?, etc.

9. Utilize students' expertise. Each student can be the expert or the consultant on their own culture. If the class is studying a topic on heroes, teacher can encourage the consultants to research the individuals from their own culture who had made a difference in other people's life. The individuals can be politicians, historians, authors, musicians, artists, athletes, or scientists. Students then can share the information with the class. This way, all the cultural groups are being acknowledged. This techniques builds a personal connection for the students and provides a global perspective for the class. In addition, the teacher can schedule a time throughout the school year, and have each student share something they think is unique about their culture or something they have learned about their culture. Treating students as the expert on their culture increases their participation in the learning process. This classroom practice can foster respect for diversity and cultural appreciation.

10. Connect school learning to real-world issues. Many textbooks do not address Asian immigrants and their contribution in the United States. Therefore, it is difficult for Asian students to relate their experiences to the mainstream culture. When studying the history of the U.S., student's own state or region, teacher can include additional information about immigration of the prominent ethnic groups where the students reside. Rather than studying the limited scope of information presented in the

textbooks, students can become the researchers themselves to generate knowledge. They can identify an ethnic group of their interest in the local community. The research areas could be the place of origin of the immigrant group, their settlement in the U.S., their struggle, and their contribution in the U.S.. Students can even extend their study by identifying the issues that are facing the different immigrant groups and the community resources that would help to resolve those issues. Students are empowered in the learning process through working in cooperative groups, analyzing primary source documents, examining historical accuracy of the information, and making decisions in the research process. By studying the various ethnic groups in-depth, students will gain a better perspective of understanding how different cultures help to form the country's national heritage.

Home-School Connection

1. Work collaboratively with Asian-Pacific American families to achieve identified common goals. Teachers can identify several goals that are valued in the Asian-Pacific American families, and reinforce those goals at school. For example, encourage APA students to show respect to older people in their families, particularly their parents, and maintain their native languages (Feng, 1994). When APA parents see that their values are also validated, they will gradually gain the trust toward American schools which is crucial in fostering their involvement in schools.
2. Make frequent contact with APA parents. Teachers can reward an APA student by making a phone call to his/her parent or writing a note to describe the child's progress at school. Since school performance is highly valued at home, letting the parents

know of the child's accomplishment brings pride to both the family and the child. This means much more than prize items that the child receives at school.

3. Use descriptive or narrative statements rather than using relative terms (e.g. good, very good, excellent) when reporting APA students' school progress to their parents. Teachers should use concrete examples to describe what students have accomplished. Since praise is given only when one does an outstanding job in most Asian cultures, commenting that a student did "good" may mean "excellent" to an APA parent. APA parents may feel disappointed when they find out the report card does not reflect what they had been told in the teacher-parent conference.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the diversity that exists among Asian-Pacific American students. In addition to cultural and regional differences, one should not neglect individual differences. If teachers treat APA students based on existing assumptions, it may not only perpetuate the stereotypes, but also limit students' opportunity to fully develop their personal, social, and academic skills. In order to work effectively with APA students, mainstream teachers first have to acknowledge the diversity that exists in groups and respect students as individuals. They also have to treat all students equally on the basis that they all have the potential to develop their skills in all areas.

Guidelines to promote equitable participation of all Asian-Pacific American students were presented. They include gaining knowledge in cross-cultural communication skills, developing a curriculum that would empower student, and building a strong

connection to student's homes and communities. The key concepts for teachers to incorporate into their classroom practices are summarized as follow:

- Respect student's cultural boundaries.
- Build a personal connection to students' cultural heritage by addressing students' names correctly.
- Equip students with the skills to identify the effective communication strategies in cross-cultural settings.
- Develop intercultural knowledge by clarifying the expectations of behaviors, concepts, or terminology.
- Avoid making assumptions of students academic abilities.
- Be cautious of the model minority stereotypes.
- Introduce positive Asian role models from a wide range of professions.
- Provide opportunities for Asian-Pacific students to develop leadership skills.
- Use multicultural literature.
- Utilize students' expertise to serve as consultants of their cultures.
- Connect school learning to real-world issues.
- Work collaboratively with Asian-Pacific American families through achieving the identified common goals.
- Make frequent contact with Asian-Pacific American parents.

The myth of the Asian-Pacific American students being the model minority is still prevalent in the education arena. However, the arising needs of the recent Asian immigrant groups challenge the existing stereotypes. Educators have to make a conscious

effort to address the individual needs of the Asian student population and promote equitable participation of all students in their schooling experiences. The goals are to enable all students to achieve academic success and possess the skills needed for participating in the democratic society.

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